

PLAN ELEMENT VIII: NEIGHBORHOODS

Our neighborhoods are the building blocks of our city. They provide a sense of place and historic foundation that is not found in other nearby communities. Some of our neighborhoods are flourishing while others are struggling. Our ultimate goal is for all City residents to live in neighborhoods that are safe, clean and, to the greatest extent possible, cohesive. When we achieve this goal, all Rockford residents should be living in neighborhoods that are either stable or improving; none should be in neighborhoods facing serious decline. In trying to improve the state of our neighborhoods, the City is keeping the following five requirements for successful neighborhood revitalization in mind:



- ▶ **Commitment** Comprehensive revitalization is a complicated and difficult process, especially in very troubled neighborhoods. It typically takes longer than one or even two political cycles to see initial results. Consequently, community and political leaders must have a strong commitment to comprehensive neighborhood revitalization for these efforts to have a realistic chance of success.
- ▶ **Communication** For truly comprehensive revitalization to occur, there must be open and ongoing communication both among City departments and between the lead agency (the Department of Community Development) and the private sector, neighborhood residents, and organizations. The City must take the lead in both providing information and soliciting input from residents and businesses within a neighborhood.
- ▶ **Coordination** By its very nature, successful comprehensive neighborhood revitalization demands careful coordination. Departments and agencies that do not ordinarily work together must communicate and coordinate their work plans. For example, it may be necessary to coordinate the efforts of agencies involved in making physical improvements, such as Public Works, with those of departments responsible for providing services for a plan to be most effective. At a minimum, preparation and implementation of neighborhood plans will require the coordinated efforts of staff from the Building, Community Development, Fire, Human Services, Police and Public Works Departments. In addition, there may be a need to involve staff from other jurisdictions, such as the Winnebago County Health Department and the Rockford School District.
- ▶ **Flexibility** When working with established programs and resources, the City must be willing to alter rules or requirements to use programs more effectively in particular situations. For example, the City has never had a program to assist homeowners in simply paving gravel driveways (a requirement of the Zoning Ordinance). There may be some instances where this would be well worth the expense in a neighborhood where several homes have gravel drives but the housing stock is otherwise in good condition.
- ▶ **Neighborhood Organizations** Among the more difficult issues associated with comprehensive neighborhood revitalization is how to ensure the presence of strong, informed, self-sustaining neighborhood organizations. These groups are probably the best source of input from residents to design and implement a plan that responds to their needs. However, establishing and strengthening such organizations is difficult, especially in low- and moderate-income neighborhoods that face many other challenges. Although the City can support these groups in various ways, the process for revitalization is very labor intensive and the desire for organization and continued participation must ultimately lie with the neighborhood residents

Although Rockford has a broad sense of what a neighborhood is, 'Rockford neighborhood' does not have a clear definition. Known neighborhoods have varying boundaries depending on what organization is contacted. And

there are gaps in the City with no neighborhood identification at all. Historic districts, schools, land use, roads and political districts all affect how a neighborhood boundary is perceived. This inconsistency in boundaries can inhibit communication and resource sharing between organizations working to improve neighborhoods. While these organizations are working to better the communities they serve, the neighborhoods, and the City as a whole, could be better served if there a more uniform framework for communication among these organizations. This includes Neighborhood Network, individual neighborhood organizations, support organizations, schools and the City. A first step in opening the lines of communication could be a round table discussion. This would allow all organizations to sit down together and talk about what a Rockford neighborhood is, what resources each organization has, and how the organizations can support each other as well as the neighborhoods they serve.

Conservation Plan for Rockford Neighborhoods

Another way to facilitate communication and create consensus would be to create a Conservation Plan for Rockford Neighborhoods. This citywide plan would be a combination of a comprehensive and strategic plan — a plan for creating neighborhood plans, if you will. It would set initial guidelines for what is to be explored more deeply in individual neighborhood plans and establish general principles for all neighborhoods to work from without having to wait for an individual neighborhood plan to be created. It would also shorten the neighborhood planning process by accomplishing some tasks initially. Hopefully, this would also aide organized neighborhoods in achieving their goals. Elements that could be covered in the Conservation Plan for Rockford Neighborhoods include, but are not limited to:

1. A definition of each neighborhood and clear, agreed-on boundaries.

A goal of this portion of the plan should be to determine neighborhood boundaries that can be used by all organizations as they work with individual neighborhoods. This does not mean that neighborhood organizations have to take on these boundaries or that funding and programs have to follow these boundaries. The purpose is to facilitate information sharing between groups. Factors that can be used to determine neighborhood boundaries include, but are not limited to:

- ▷ Neighborhood/community organizations
- ▷ Style, type, age and other characteristics of structures
- ▷ Historic significance
- ▷ Historic settlement (when, what ethnic groups, how)
- ▷ Subdivisions
- ▷ Transportation elements (historical and current)
- ▷ Residents' understanding of neighborhood boundaries
- ▷ School districts
- ▷ City understandings of neighborhood boundaries
- ▷ Organization understandings of neighborhood boundaries



2. Analysis of the current state and trends of all neighborhoods.

Create a neighborhood “EKG” — a set of indicators showing how each neighborhood stacks up against the City as a whole. These indicators will be selected primarily but not exclusively from the Census. The types of questions that the EKG will answer about each neighborhood? Is its homeownership rate higher or lower than the City, how does the educational attainment of its residents stack up, and so forth. This information can use GIS and the Internet in the creation and displaying of the neighborhood EKG.

3. Identification of what should be preserved, added, removed or kept out for each neighborhood.

This would be a “mini framework plan” for each neighborhood. Putting out general guidelines for neighborhoods, still speaking generally. For example, in XYZ neighborhood we want to preserve the

character and remove crime. Later, the neighborhood plan would say specifics such as what the character is and how to preserve it and what are the actual problems with crime and how do we deal with it? The neighborhood EKG, city staff, community organizations and citizen input would identify what these elements are.

4. *Identification of action steps by types of neighborhoods.*

Using the neighborhood EKG, neighborhoods could be classified (i.e., deteriorating, fair, stable, etc.) and action steps for each type of neighborhood created. Deteriorating neighborhoods are first priority for neighborhood plans; stable neighborhoods should maintain this status by doing the following things, and so on. This would allow some direction and guidance for neighborhood organizations and residents.

5. *Steps for implementation.*

Assign responsibility for implementing each action step and a time frame for when it should be completed.

7. *Process for evaluation of the plan.*

The Neighborhood Conservation Plan would not initiate specific programs, but action steps could be reviewed for progress. The neighborhood EKG could possibly be used as an evaluation tool as well. If benchmarks are set, and an EKG indicator reaches that benchmark, we know we are making positive progress. Other evaluation techniques would be considered.

Healthy Neighborhoods Planning Program

The City has started on a Healthy Neighborhoods Planning Program which it plans to continue for several years to come. The objective is to evaluate every neighborhood in the City, preparing specific plans for at least two individual neighborhoods each year. The Mid Town North Plan for 2003-2007 was the first of these plans.

Following the *Policy Guide on Neighborhood Planning* adopted by the American Planning Association in 1998, any neighborhood plans should fit within the framework of the policies below.

- ▶ Any neighborhood planning should be done within the context of Rockford's community-wide plan, i.e., the 2020 Plan.
- ▶ Planning decisions should be made at the most appropriate level. Those that have limited impact on the community as a whole should be made by, or on the basis of given advice by, those neighborhood groups most directly affected. On the other hand, planning decisions affecting Rockford as a whole or a larger part of the community should not be overly influence by a single neighborhood's needs or interests.
- ▶ Neighborhoods should be encouraged to seek the best organizational structure suited to achieve their goals and objectives such as, but not limited to, neighborhood associations, co-ops or development corporations.
- ▶ To be effective, neighborhood planning often needs to go beyond addressing the physical conditions of the area to examine issues of social equity. To that end, the City of Rockford will work with other social service, housing, economic development, public health, educational, recreational, judicial and other organizations to ensure that the issues of social equity, children and families receive attention from its planners.

Mid Town North was chosen as the first neighborhood plan to be completed because of the effects on the neighborhood from the relocation of Charles Street and the SwedishAmerican Hospital expansion. South Main has been chosen as the second neighborhood plan to be completed because of its affect on the redevelopment

of Barber Colman Village. After the South Main plan is completed, two criteria will be used to choose neighborhoods to plan. The first is the neighborhood EKG, a set of indicators as described in part 2 of the Conservation Plan for Rockford Neighborhoods section of this element. The second step, which will be done on an annual basis in the future, will be to put out a request for requests, if you will. Neighborhood organizations will be asked to submit a request for the City to work with them in creating a plan for their neighborhood. Those submitting requests would be evaluated on the basis of their EKG.

Neighborhood plans and planning should address a wide range of issues, tailored to meet the specific needs of the specific neighborhood. Each neighborhood plan that is created should include the following elements (understanding that some elements may need to be adjusted for specific neighborhoods):

- ▶ A definition of neighborhood boundaries, including a description of how they were derived and how they apply to municipal service areas.
- ▶ A directory of who is involved in the planning process and who should be involved;
- ▶ A vision statement.
- ▶ Goals and objectives that will serve to implement the vision statement.
- ▶ A physical plan of the neighborhood indicating proposed improvements to it.
- ▶ Specific tasks and assignments spelled out in an implementation chart, including short-term and long term tasks.
- ▶ Design guidelines, especially for infill construction.
- ▶ Links to citywide objectives.
- ▶ A directory of resources.
- ▶ Short-term implementation projects to build support and momentum.
- ▶ Statistics about the neighborhood, including population, employment, education, etc.
- ▶ Maps showing neighborhood resources such as churches, libraries, parks, historic sites, major employers, neighborhood landmarks and demographics.
- ▶ A date of adoption and date for the next review or update of the plan.
- ▶ A statement of acceptance by the City of Rockford.

Neighborhood Academy



A neighborhood academy can be used to train neighborhood leaders and provide public education on community topics. Cities such as New York City; Nashville, TN and Milwaukee, WI have had success in community education through a neighborhood academy. The typical structure of a neighborhood academy is that courses are offered to residents for free and nonresidents at a small fee. A space in a community center or a separate structure is usually the location for courses; however some cities are offering online education resources. The topics can include, but are not limited to:

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| ▶ Neighborhood Organizing | ▶ Teen/Youth Issues |
| ▶ Neighborhood Revitalization | ▶ Job Hunting/Resume Building |
| ▶ Community Safety | ▶ Zoning and Code Compliance |
| ▶ Parenting | ▶ Housing Rehabilitation |

The Mid Town North neighborhood plan states as a goal, “Set up a pilot Neighborhood Academy offering a variety of workshops to give residents the knowledge and information they need to help make a difference in their neighborhood.” Another goal is to, “Establish a permanent Neighborhood Academy that will offer workshops to residents citywide.” Departments to be involved in this venture include Community Development, Human Services, Police and Fire, the Community Foundation NIL and the Neighborhood Network. Planned

time line for the project is for the pilot to be started up sometime in 2004-2005 and the citywide neighborhood academy to start in 2006.

Role of the City of Rockford

- ▶ The City will incorporate neighborhood-level perspectives into its decision-making and planning processes.
- ▶ City staff will ensure compatibility among the 2020 Plan, zoning ordinances, the CIP, and any other City planning documents and any approved neighborhood plans.
- ▶ The City will establish citywide goals and criteria for approving neighborhood plans. These criteria will be developed with the participation and support of the neighborhoods.
- ▶ The City will take approved neighborhood plans into consideration when determining funding for such things as transportation, community policing, solid waste services, housing, economic development, tourism and the Rockford Public Library.
- ▶ The City will evaluate the costs and benefits of changing the current policy of pursuing violations of minimum property standards only when there is a complaint to one which is systematic and undertaken on a subarea basis according to a defined schedule. Further research will also be undertaken to institute a form of apartment licensing to ensure compliance with minimum standards. Should it be decided that the benefits outweigh the costs, the City will take the steps necessary to implement such a program.
- ▶ The City will involve and educate its elected and appointed officials and its employees about the importance of neighborhood plans, the planning process and the role they play in implementing those plans.
- ▶ The City will provide regular opportunities, both formal and informal, for neighborhood leaders to meet among themselves and with local officials to discuss how the implementation of neighborhood planning is going and to provide input into the implementation process.
- ▶ The City will work with major institutions such as the three local hospitals to develop strategies designed to bring some of the economic and social benefits of those institutions into the lives of neighboring residents.
- ▶ The City will identify those neighborhoods that show early signs of deterioration and work with those neighborhoods to find ways to change the momentum to a more positive direction. The objective would be to devise means to keep these areas from deteriorating to the point where they would become significant problem areas, and to monitor their progress over time.
- ▶ The City will identify those neighborhoods that serve as transition between more solidly residential areas and nonresidential areas. This may be by design, as in the apartments behind the commercial area along Wansford Way in Harrison Park Subdivision. More often, it occurs as areas change from residential to office or commercial uses over time. A prime example would be the 600 and 700 blocks of North Church Street where numerous office and commercial uses have taken over what once was a purely residential neighborhood. The City's job will then be twofold:
 - ▷ To ensure that City ordinances protect residents in newly developing areas when they are adjacent to non-residential development, and ensure that those ordinances are uniformly enforced; and
 - ▷ To ensure that any changes in land use in established neighborhoods follow good planning and development practices and are carried out in a way that does not harm remaining residential areas.



To return to the premise put forth at the start of this section — neighborhoods are the building blocks of any city. It is the City's intention to ensure the future viability of these building blocks in the future to the greatest extent possible through implementation of the actions proposed in the 2020 Plan.

Since adoption of the 2020 Plan in 2004, two new neighborhood plans have been completed and are included here as Appendices S and T. The full text for both plans appears in the appendices; however, a summary of each is provided here.

- ▶ **HOPE VI** The HOPE VI neighborhood, outlined on the map below, was selected for preparation of a neighborhood action plan in mid-2006 on the basis of anticipated impacts of major projects in the area, primarily the HOPE VI project which provided for construction of over 100 new homes and the demolition of the Winnebago County Housing Authority's Champion Park Apartments on Rockford's west side. Other plans and projects impacting the area are possible redevelopment of the Rockford Housing Authority's Concord Commons Apartments, expansion and improvements to Washington Park, and implementation of both the Springfield Corridor Study and the West State Corridor Plan. The HOPE VI action plan includes proposals relating to subsidized housing, public improvements, private property improvements, neighborhood sustainability, marketing the area to new businesses and residents, and improving the **neighborhood fabric**.



- ▶ **College-Seminary** At the same time, the College-Seminary neighborhood, outlined on the map above on the right, was chosen on the basis of anticipated change resulting from reconstruction of the Morgan Street bridge, and the then proposed, now actual, demolition of the Rockford Housing Authority's Jane Addams development. Also part of the consideration was the proposal to develop a whitewater park on the City-owned property formerly owned by Ingersoll along the river. The Housing Authority, ORCHiD — a very active neighborhood organization — and Joseph Behr played major roles in preparation of this plan. The action plan included in the document covers upgrading public improvements, improving safety and security, bringing new retail to the neighborhood, redeveloping RHA properties in the neighborhood, establishing a community center and community gardens, and making the neighborhood a safe place for kids.